Sacred Mountains of the World: Fuji

The following is an extract taken form Edwin Bernbaum's book, ***Sacred Mountains of the World.*** *In this section, Bernbaum examines the history and significance of Mt. Fuji to Japanese culture.*

As a consequence of their deep reverence for sacred mountains, the Japanese have one of the oldest traditions of mountain climbing in the world. Ascents of major peaks were recorded as early as the ninth century AD long before the sport of mountaineering developed in the European Alps in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Over the succeeding years, countless pilgrims climbed such peaks as Mount Fuji, seeking the spiritual exhilaration and power of the heights. Those who returned from pilgrimages to sacred summits were treated with special reverence. As one scholar of Japanese religions has noted, "It is well known that pilgrims coming back from sacred spaces (in the mountains) were regarded with awe; common people saluted them, make offerings, even tried to touch them."

Mt Fuji

The mountain that most represents Japan in the eyes of the world is, of course, Mount Fuji. No peak more beautifully embodies the spirit of a nation. The elegant simplicity of its lines, sweeping up into the graceful shape of an inverted fan painted with delicate patterns of pure, white snow, symbolizes the quest for beauty and perfection that has shaped so much of Japanese culture, both secular and sacred. Suspended between heaven and earth neither rock nor cloud, the volcano appears as a cone of crystallized sky, floating above a vast landscape of fields, villages, lakes and sea. On a clear day, when smog clears and the worlds seems fresh and new, the mountain's symmetric outline can be seen from the cramped and polluted city of Tokyo, sixty miles away. The very perfection of its form, startling in its incredible simplify, suggest the mystery of the infinite.

Although many writers and artists have tried to capture the spirit of Fuji no one has ever completely succeeded. Something about the mountain, the mystery of its sublime perfection, evades the stroke of pen and brush. As one modern Japanese critic has said, "The reason why there are curiously few fine poems in Japanese or Chinese, or fine paintings about Fuji is that the subject is to overpoweringly splendid."

Although the sight of Fuji may inspire thoughts of eternal beauty, the mountain itself was created quite recently. Much younger than most Japanese mountains, it burst forth from the earth only 25,000 years ago when an eruption buried the surrounding plain beneath ten feet of volcanic ash. The cone we see today assumed its general form about 8000 BC but the mountain continued erupting over the succeeding millennia, growing to its present altitude of 12, 3888 feet. A composite volcano, Fuji owes its graceful shape to alternating layers of ash and lava that have given its smoothly rising slopes the internal structure and strength to withstand the forces of upheaval and erosion. Nine eruptions convulsed the peak between A.D.781 and 1083 alone. The mountain last shot forth fire in 1707 when ash swirled up to drift down on Edo—modern day Tokyo. Patches of sand on the crater rim hot enough to cook eggs indicate that Fuji could erupt again. Although the volcano's eruptions have brought destruction and death through the centuries, they have also created the beautiful landscape of forests and lakes that surrounds the sacred mountain like the garden of an earthly paradise. Some of the most unusual features of this landscape, now a national park interspersed with small towns, are networks of hollow

tubes formed by flows of lava. Religious tradition has associated these tunnels and caves with the womb of the mountain, giving the volcano a distinctly female character.

The name Fuji probably comes from an Ainu word meaning “fire” or “deity of fire”. Obviously a god of great power, the mountain had to be placated. In A.D. 806 a local official built a shrine near the foot of the volcano to keep it from erupting. The priests assigned the task of pacifying the mountain apparently neglected their duties because Fuji erupted with great violence in 864, causing much damage in a nearby province. The governor of that province blamed the priests for failing to perform the proper rites and constructed another shrine in his own territory where he could make sure everything was done correctly. The fiery god of the mountain became at a later date the more peaceful Shinto goddess of Mount Fuji—Konohana Sakuya Hime, the “Goddess of Flowering Trees.” Today she is worshipped at the shrine originally built for the older deity.

Impressed by it purity of form and extraordinary height, Buddhists found in Fuji a sublime symbol of meditation. The word they used to describe it summit, *zenjo,* is a Buddhist term for the flawless state of perfect concentration. Just as the peak of a mountain soars above the mists that gather in the valleys below, so a person in meditation rises above the passions and illusions that obscure the vision of ordinary people. The Japanese say that the clouds that cover the tops of other peaks only curl around the foot of Fuji. Its summit, a lofty place of contemplation, provides an attractive sanctuary for the gods, who dwell there free from the sorrows that trouble the world below.

The people of Edo, modern-day Tokyo, had felt a special fondness for Fuji. They even attempted to bring the mountain to the city. In 1765, followers of a Buddhist group named Fuji-ko initiated the practice of building replicas of Mount Fuji in Tokyo. Devotees of the sacred mountain responded with great enthusiasm: between the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, more than fifty of these models were constructed. One of the largest and most impressive was a cone over thirty feet high, constructed on top of an ancient burial mound and capped with volcanic rocks brought back from Fuji itself. A zigzag path with nine switchbacks mimicked the ninety nine turns of the actual ascent. Fuji-ko members, especially women and the young, as well as the old and sick, would ritually climb these replicas, imagining themselves climbing the peak itself. To provide an authentic experience of the ascent, the models had to evoke the inner feeling, rather than the external appearance, of the sacred mountain. Many of these Fuji replicas still exist in Shinto shrines scattered throughout Tokyo, and every summer Fuji-ko member ritually climb the more important ones before going on pilgrimages to the actual peak.

Echoes of this practice are found in the festival that marks the end of the official climbing season on Mount Fuji. Each year, on August 26, the people of Fuji-Yoshida, a town at the base of the mountain form a religious precession to carry around two brightly lacquered models of the sacred peak. The larger of the two, borne on wooden beams supported by men with muscular calves, weighs 2475 pounds. Laughing and shouting, enthusiastic schoolboys bear the smaller replica the through the crowded street of the village. Priests in smooth white robes and peaked black caps initiate the ceremonies at the Shinto shrine situated at the foot of Fuji. At night people light a line of straw towers that runs up the main street of the town. The resulting bonfires burn like red-and-orange geysers of molten lava spewing out of the ground. Beneath the mysterious light of the stars, the gods appear to emerge from the mountain to dance in a line of wraithlike flames.

On Fuji, hikers and tourists follow routes established long ago by practitioners and devotees of Fuji-ko. In the height of the official climbing season, during the months of July and August, more than a million people swarm up the sides of the volcano to gather like insects around the summit. So many have made the ascent, scattering refuse in every direction, that Fuji has the dubious distinction of possessing the world's first polluted snowfield. Here and there, sprinkled like grains of rice among the crowds, appear groups of pilgrims dressed in white, wearing straw hats and carrying staffs, still seeking the sacred where the mountain meets the sky.

Four major routes zigzag up the gritty ash slopes of Fuji, converging on the crater rim from different sides of the volcano. The long lines of climbers, representing all ages from smooth-faced children to wizened grandmothers, pass through ten stations, equipped with huts and such amenities as food and bedding. The hut keepers, descended from the religious guides and shrine attendants of the past, burn characters into each climber's staff, indicating the station reached. Whether religiously motivated or not, the Japanese take these staffs home as treasured mementos of their climb of Japan's most famous landmark. Most spend the night at the eighth station to reach the summit the next morning at dawn.

Moving through the eerie silence of the final hours of night, pebbles crunching beneath their feet, the climbers come at last to the crater rim, poised on the edge of darkness. As they wait on the summit, arms crossed over their chests to hold in the warmth of their bodies, the sky to the east gradually brightens and the sun rises from the sea. Beneath their feet above a darkened world, a reddish gold light ignites the tops of clouds to leap like fire from one to the next, spreading to the limits of the far horizon. Off to the west, in the shadow of the mountain, the dark forms of hills and ridges emerge in graceful curves from a sea of soft blue mist. Immersed in light that flows through the air like water, tourist and pilgrim alike stand in wonder, bathed in splendor beyond the world of ordinary experience.

Bernbaum, Edwin, ***Sacred Mountains of the World,*** Sierra Club Books, San Francisco, 1990, p.p. 56-68.